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ABSTRACT

Works of three Chicana authors focus on the individual Chicana's response to tradition and restraint and, taken as a whole, illustrate three essential steps in breaking away from the myth of the Chicana as submissive, suffering, passive, and powerless. "El ser mujer..." by poet Ana Castillo calls for the Chicana to speak out regarding her strength. Speech is the first step towards breaking the stereotype and is a revolutionary act for women with a centuries-long history of silence. Estela Portillo Trambley's short story, "The Trees," illustrates the disastrous results of not confronting one's past, however painful the process. As a second step, Chicanas must confront the stereotypical dichotomy of whore and virgin which has plagued and divided them both individually and as a group. The acceptance Chicanas desire will come when they can speak out with full awareness of their past and of that mixture of captivity and complicity with which they have helped create their dependent status. The poetry of Alma Villanueva celebrates a "new Chicana" and represents a "new complicity with one's destiny" arising not from captivity but from responsibility. The work of these three writers suggests a strategy for Chicana self-awareness.
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Captivity and Complicity: Some Suggestions for Teaching about Chicana Writers

by Carol Maier

The anger and determination expressed by some of the Chicanas at this conference tell us a great deal about the current position of Hispanic women in the United States, for indeed this is a group that seems to have been refused "admission" by many different sectors of society.[1] Long characterized and criticized as passive and submissive they are reprimanded when their behavior seems to become overly agressive; long characterized and criticized as strong but silent, they are also reprimanded when they speak too openly about their feelings and opinions. In regard to the "feminist movement" they have remained rather separate, primarily because of the solidarity they have felt with all Hispanics, and--more specifically--because of the solidarity they feel with their particular Hispanic minorities. This loyality is not often understood by Anglo feminists who are far more willing to think and talk in terms of a society without males as well as one free of male domination.

These differences in allegiances and priorities, as well as significant differences in cultural backgrounds (differences that often include language), have meant that Hispanic women are only very slowly becoming part of what we consider "Women's Studies." The re-

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luctance is usually two-sided; in many instances Hispanic women have been slow to participate in Women's Studies programs and Anglo women have hesitated to present material with which they were unfamiliar --material that until very recently has not been readily available (and is still not always readily available). If, as the theme of this conference suggests, Women's Studies hopes to educate for change, we need to continually both educate and change our definition of Women's Studies itself, opening its boundaries to include the experiences and writing of all women. New materials like Dexter Fisher's recent anthology of minority women writers (The Third Woman) will make possible this expansion.[3]

As a teacher of Spanish long interested in Hispanic women writers, I have been intrigued for several years by the recent writing of Hispanic American women. In this paper, because Chicana writers work almost exclusively in English and are thus more accessible to Anglo readers than many other Hispanic writers, I will confine my discussion to work by Chicanas. (Although not without encouraging you to investigate as well the writing of other Hispanic American women). Following the definition that Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enríquez provide in their recent book La Chicana/ The Mexican American Woman, I will use the word "Chicana" to refer to "a woman of Mexican ancestry living in the United States, whether she refers to herself as Mexican, Mexican-American, latina, hispana, or whatever."[4] This term, of course, contains a wide spectrum of attitudes, backgrounds, generations and present lifestyles. Most particularly, it contains a wide variety of relationships or interactions with Anglo culture and the English language. But it does serve to designate the revaluation of the term "Chicano," which

has occurred in the last decade. It is a term that indicates new pride in Mexican-American heritage and distinguishes Mexican-Americans from other Hispanic Americans. (As Mirandé and Enríquez point out, words like "Hispanic" or "Latino" tend to lump together on an essentially European linguistic basis all people of "Spanish" descent, thus leaving aside important differences such as the predominantly Indian background of the Chicano.)[5]

When we open the work of Chicana writers and feminists we find ourselves participating in a varied process of self-examination that is instructive for both Anglos and Chicanas because it reveals a history of trapped talent, of captivity and of passive power, which although to different degrees and in different situations, have also characterized the history of Anglo women. As part of a process that Mirandé and Enríquez call "demythicizing," the contemporary Chicana recognizes and affirms a long history, rich with traditions and myths, that traces her strength back to the goddess Coatlicue (serpent woman, mother of the gods, weeping woman/ "la llorona"), "creator and destroyer of all matter and form," as well as to many other feminine deities and to the integral role that women played in all aspects of Aztec society.[6] Once the Spaniards arrived in Mexico, the position of women changed drastically and whether Indian slaves, mestizas or criollos, women's position during the three-hundred-year Colonial period was one of submission and suffering. Even so, as Chicana feminists have begun to take a new look at the Colonial period, they have found female figures of great strength (of which Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz is only the most striking example) and they have begun to vindicate negative figures, of which the best example is La Malinche or doña Marina, the alleged traitor or scape goat

who has long borne the blame for the Spanish Conquest. Strong individual women continue to be present during the fight for independence, the Mexican Revolution and the settlement of the American Southwest (the period during which the term "Chicano" is first appropriate).

Concomitant with this examination of Chicana history has been an exploration and re-visioning of the stereotypical Chicana who had often been considered a thoroughly passive, submissive and powerless victim of an agressive, overpowering male-dominated culture. She traditionally had open to her her two extreme roles: the "bad" woman (usually associated with the whore or la Malinche) and the "good" woman (usually associated with the Mother or the Virgin Mary). Revisioning and demythicizing has also meant reexamination of that duality and of <u>marianismo</u> or <u>hembrismo</u>, names given to the "long-suffering" female force that complements the oppressive, demanding, confining male force known as "machismo." The process has taken different forms, but whether we focus on the fact that Chicanas have always had great influence even in apparently passive (i.e. powerless) situations or on the benefits of long-suffering (i.e. the great respect or even devotion enjoyed by Chicana mothers), it is clear that Chicanas are not now, nor have they ever been, weak and ineffectual in relation to Chicano males. On the contrary, once <u>machismo</u> and its complementary female force are seen as an inter-related system or dialectics it is evident that the Chicana is an <u>active</u> human being whose place in the home (as a woman) and whose place in society (as a Chicano) has made her seem far more vulnerable and victimized than she really is, even though Chicano culture has traditionally demanded a great deal of its women.

This recognition of her own history and ability places the Chicana

in a paradoxical and painful position as she comes in contact with institutions that do not grant her the strength and influence she claims. Her dilemma is that of a woman faced with incomprehension not only from Anglos but also from Chicanos whose understanding of the relation between machismo and marianismo is not the one that governs her own thoughts and actions. Her perceptions of Chicanas may have been demythicized, but in the eyes of others she is still a stereotype: passive, submissive, quietly complicit in her own captivity. As articulate as many Chicana feminists are, it is clear that much of their struggle is still ahead of them, and that many battles will be fought for the community of Chicanas by the relatively few individual women who are on the "front lines" of descrimination and misunderstanding.

As an Anglo teacher of Chicano literature, I believe I would be speaking out of turn if I were to suggest for Chicanas a strategy for that struggle. On the other hand, sometimes the perspective of an outsider can be quite helpful, and it is with that thought in mind--as well as with the hope of encouraging Anglo teachers to consider and teach these works--that I bring to your attention several poems and a short story by three contemporary Chicana writers. Each in its own way is instructive for change because although they all reject subordination, they all focus on the individual Chicana's response to tradition and restraint. And they all suggest, even though indirectly, that striking back at the "oppressor" (whether institutions or individuals, Anglos or Chicanos) will only bring about change if the person who strikes out is strong enough to structure a truly altered situation.

The first poem, "El ser mujer. . ." ("Being a Woman . . .") by Ana Castillo, a young poet who lives and works in Chicago, causes the

reader to reflect on female strength as long-suffering silence and submission.[7]

El ser mujer . '. .

i'm thinking of you. In the
Silent hours of this infinite night
As I lay enwrapped in the
Protecting arms of my sleeping husband.
Querida Mami,+ Am I not still
your "Cabellitos De Oro"++
Who once found her dreams
lying in the warmth of your bosom,
on those bleak and icy nights,
when the darkness became too great
for me to bear

Mami-Dime por favor, si puedes;+++
Must I be a woman now? I know
I bear the reflection of your youth.
Yet i am not ready to echo those
trying years. One by one.
until the time comes when my
hands are filled with betraying
scars and wrinkles too.
Mami, I'm afraid!
I'm not as strong as you. Yet,
I suppose there was a time
when you did not know your own
Strength. You do now.
I'm thinking of you. In the
silent hours of this night.
I can hear your gentle voice whisper:
"Persinate, mi hija." But it is to you--++++
I pray, Mi Querida Madre. . .
As my eyes surrender to the darkness.

\+ Dear Mother
++ Goldilocks
+++ Mother, please tell me if you can
++++ "Cross yourself, daughter."

As we read this poem we experience woman "power" as endurance and enervation. The questioning, unwilling daughter is pressed into captivity and quiet not so much by her husband as by her mother, whose

presence in the young woman's thoughts remind her that being a woman is a kind of dark, underground activity where you resist and wield power anonymously, nonverbally. Each time I read this poem by Ana Castillo--who has not surrendered to the darkness but spoken her strength--I think also of another, "landmark" poem by the Argentine poet Alfonsina Storni (1892-1938). The first stanza of that poem, "It May Well Be"/ "Bien pudiera ser," reads as follows:

> Maybe all that my verses have expressed
> is simply what was never allowed to be;
> only what was hidden and suppressed
> from woman to woman, from family to family.[8]

This same call for female speech, made indirectly by Ana Castillo's poem, is--it seems to me--the first step in breaking complicity in the myth of submissive, powerless Chicanas, and seen in this way speech itself is a courageous, revolutionary act that gives voice to centuries of women who remained silent.

Speech, however, is not the final but the first step toward change; for as old patterns are broken, new ones must be born. If the voice strikes out only in anger and resentment, it is most likely that, in spite of a big splash, the circles it opens will not be very far-reaching. I would suggest that the acceptance Chicana women request (and even beyond that acceptance, the change we hope female participation will bring in existing institutions) will be possible only when, in addition to speaking out, they speak with full awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, their fears and of the mixture of captivity and complicity that has characterized and made possible their apparently dependent relationships with male-dominated institutions.

This awareness implies a difficult, complex step toward change, which I find well represented by "The Trees," a very provocative short

story by Estela Portillo Trambley. The story is from Rain of Scorpions, a collection of stories and the first work of fiction published by a Chicana (1975).[9] Its protagonist is a young woman named Nina who marries Ishmael Ayala, the youngest son of a wealthy apple farmer who has developed a famous, perfect apple. Nina's own background is one of violence and unhappiness. When Ishmael falls in love with her, she is working as a scullery maid for a blind priest. Not far in the back of her thoughts is the great cruelty shown her by her own grandmother, most expecially a rape sanctioned by the grandmother who had sold Nina to four drunks. Ishmael takes Nina to his home, his apple farm, which is a kind of Garden of Eden shared by four brothers and their father. To Nina the paradise is stagnant; she finds the women submissive and boring and her own husband passive and ineffectual because he is unconcerned when his inheritance is smaller than that of his older brothers. The love and trust that binds her husband's family are foreign to her; she wants more than Ishmael's small share of the farm and she contrives a plan to disrupt the traditional order and re-distribute the property. Chance works against Nina and the disruption she brings about leads to destruction and death for almost everyone involved.

Even though the "message" of Portillo's parable is problematic --mostly because Nina is what critics Patricia and Vernon Lattin call an "ambiguous" protagonist--,[10] several things are quite clear. In the first place, Nina's disappointment with paradise is legitimate; it is a patriarchal, static, (hence) uncreative place, governed by a love that binds men closely but includes women only peripherally as wives of the four brothers. Also clear is the alteration of that order which Nina achieves; as the narrator explains in the final paragraph: "What-

ever the reasons may be, the garden of Eden became a desolation."[11] Less clear perhaps is the evaluation or statement about Nina's actions that the story suggests. It is not easy to define the limits of her failure or success; she does end the patriarchy but in doing so she also destroys the garden itself. She also fails to leave her own imprint: the final lines tell us that the Ayala graves were marked with tombstones but Nina's grave is not marked. "Perhaps she was never important enough," wonder the story's last words. Perhaps, but if we re-read the description we are given of Nina, it becomes quite clear that she could have been important enough; she was bright, confident, ambitious and she saw clearly the flaw of patriarchy in the Garden of Eden. She was also, however, afraid; her own background was a "sore" that she disguised but did not confront, did not heal. When she assumes the Ayala name through marriage she wants all of the power to which that name entitles her, but she never vindicates her own name, her own past. Nina never learns to be or sing herself; her ambition is never based on her own strength but on a grasping, fearful attempt at control of her rightful share (or, rather, her husband's rightful share) of the farm. Her power is never from herself; she can not understand the love among the four brothers but neither can she substitute another love. Although she lashes out she can not reach out and ultimately, therefore, her hopes for paradise are no more dynamic than those of the present patriarchy. Were her plans to have worked out, the paradise she rejected would have been altered because she would have had a larger piece of it, but essentially it would have continued as the same patriarchy. Her goal is to tighten her own grasp, not to change the basic mechanics of the system; her assumption is that power will insure

strength. What she never perceives is that strength for her could only have arisen from a confrontation with her own fear, an assumption of her own namelessness, an acceptance of her own anonymous and painful past.

Fortunately, as we saw at the beginning of this paper, Chicana writers and feminists are beginning to take on their own pasts, even though in many instances they seem to be doing it in the angry, eventually self-destructive way that Nina does in "The Trees." That statement is certainly not meant as a rejection, because, as the poem by Ana Castillo suggests, the first angry step is essential, and even Nina's self-destruction made possible some alteration. Nevertheless, education for change must look beyond immediate alteration and, if change is to be realized, the burden of self-creation is on the Chicana herself, as several Chicana writers have made quite clear. One excellent example is an essay by Sylvia Conzáles that appeared last summer in Nuestro magazine. Gonzáles discusses the difficulties of Chicana feminism and the pain of confronting the dichotomy of whore and virgin that has long split Chicana women (both as a group and as individuals). Wholeness, she suggests, will come only by assuming, even affirming that split, painful though the process may be: "If the Chicana, who has suffered so much should choose now to be neither Malinche nor Virgin, her new path may seem uncharted and lonely. But in the end, it may lead back to a strengthening of the very virtue she is now accused of destroying."[12]

It should be encouraging to note that this "new Chicana" already has at least one poet, Alma Villanueva, whose poems celebrate and sing herself. She is, as Elizabeth Ordóñez says in a review of Villanueva's book Bloodroot, "a new Eve giving birth to herself" who "dares to en-

vision. . a world reborn through the feminist-androgynous principle ('something we can't even imagine')."[13] Her poems do not clamor for a share in paradise but begin with her own song; she is looking for nothing and starts from her own body, her own beauty; not without an awareness of pain and injustice (both of which are present in these poems), but beginning from the eden of her own perception:[14]

> is life that precious? have I missed
> something? would I rather
> die
> than be stripped of beauty? we
> miss the point when we
> hate. can we
> love when we
> believe ourselves un/
> deserving of
> beauty? I
> have lived in poverty, but never
> without hope, never
> without beauty: . . .
>
> (mexican memos)

As Elizabeth Ordóñez has written, Alma Villanueva is "a mujer-poeta who has found her own voice, and we expect to hear much more of it as it continues its metamorphosis."[15] I, too, recommend her poetry to you, and I would like to end this paper with one of her poems because they suggest the strength that Chicanas (and all women) will need as we confront institutions; they speak out from that strength and they represent a new complicity with one's destiny which arises from responsibility rather than captivity:

bloodroot[16]

I grow heavy with the sperm
of trees,
with the nectar
of hummingbirds (listen to their
motor, purring)
with the journeying
wind, it
fills me
and tiny kisses cover
my eyes, my neck,
my leafy hair: roots

threaten to form;
my toes ache;
my eyes shut
and chrysalis begins. I
see the sun in a
bloody pattern: colors dance.
different eyes will open
and my roots are wise; they
love me, but not
too well.

I grow heavy with the sperm
of trees.

Notes

[1] See especially the paper presented at this convention by María Eugenia Matute-Bianchi, "Could the Alice Bloomfields Have Been Chicanas?" (Session titled "Perspectives on Hispanic Women).

[2] For several discussions of Chicana feminism, see: Martha P. Cotera, The Chicana Feminist (Austin, Texas: Information Systems Development, 1977).

[3] Dexter Fisher, The Third Woman. Minority Women Writers of the United States (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980).

[4] Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enríquez, La Chicana (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 11.

[5] La Chicana, pp. 10-12.

[6] La Chicana, pp. 17-23. See also: Martha P. Cotera, Diosa y Hembra. The History and Heritage of Chicanas in the United States (Austin, Texas: Information Systems Development, 1976), pp. 12-24.

[7] Ana Castillo, Otro canto. . . (Chicago: Alternativa Publications, 1977), p. 9.

[8] Alfonsina Storni, "It May Be," The Other Voice, Joanna Bankier, et al, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976), p. 20.

[9] Estela Portillo Trambley, Rain of Scorpions and Other Writings (Berkeley: Tonantiuh International, 1975).

[10] Patricia and Vernon Lattin, "Power and Freedom in the Stories of Estela Portillo Trambley," Critique, 21, 1 (1979), p. 99.

[11] Rain of Scorpions, p. 23.

[12] Sylvia Gonzales, "La Chicana: Malinche or Virgin?," Nuestro (June/July 1979), p. 45.

[13] Elizabeth Ordóñez, Review of Alma Villanueva, Bloodroot, Revista Chicano-Riqueña, 6, 4 (Otoño 1978), pp. 75 and 74.

[14] from "mexican memos," Alma Villanueva, Bloodroot (Austin: Place of Herons Press, 1977), p. 68.

[15] Elizabeth Ordóñez, p. 75.

[16] "bloodroot," Bloodroot, p. 1.